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ABSTRACT

Due in part to the open enrollment policy in junior colleges, there is a great diversity in student reading ability that dictates a need to individualize reading instruction. Individualization, defined as personalized instruction, may be accomplished through helping the student to read course materials, helping him to read special materials, or helping him in terms of reading skill needs. The Genesee Community College, Flint, Michigan, relies on several measures to determine student entry skills, provides perscralized programs designed to develop skill weakness areas, and evaluates individual progress as it relates to program and individual goals. Emphasis in instruction is on improvement of vocabulary, comprehension, and rate. References are included. (MS)

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Problems of Individualization

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When we speak of problems peculiar to the teaching of reading in a community college, we are saying that the community college has teaching problems in reading exclusively its own and not shared with other types of collegiate institutions. This can be questioned. I believe that we have the same teaching problems in all institutions, but that in the community college we have a concentration of certain kinds of reading problems. This concentration stems from the open-door policy. We must recognize that high school grade point average is still the major criterion used for admitting high school graduates into four-year colleges. This is not necessarily true at the two-year college. At the community college, with its open-door policy, students of all grade point averages are admitted. The following student patterns, generally, are matriculated, with a large representation from group four:

The C average and higher--good in reading

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The C average and higher--poor in reading
The less-than-C average--good in reading
The less-than-C average--poor in reading

The Need for Individualization

The foregoing patterns may result in a fifteen year spread in the ability to read, yet all the students are in grade 13--the freshman year in college. With this diversity, together with the attendant lack of the C grade point average for many and its complications, we have a compounding of problems. With this diversity and compounding of problems, is it correct to handle these students, as many teachers do, on the basis that they are all the same? If teachers handle students on this basis, they do so because they are teaching grade level and not students. The vast differences in students dictate that there is a need to individualize reading instruction.

In individualizing reading instruction at the college level, there is not complete agreement as to how to go about indivídualizing. There is common agreement, however, that individualized instruction is personalized teaching. This can be done three ways: (1) Help the student to read his college textbooks; here we are material centered and the reading levels of the student and text may be poorly matched. (2) Help the student with his reading of special reading workbooks and manuals; again the student and materials may be poorly matched. (3) Help the student in terms of his reading skill needs; here we are concerned with the goals of the student and not the material. With this approach, there is a concerted effort to match the workbooks and material with a student's needs and reading level.

Whichever of the three plans is used, an individualized reading program means a break from traditional procedures that are class centered. Underlying the non-class-centered, individualized reading program are a number of assumptions that are neither new nor original:

learning begins where the student is
reading basically is an independent activity
students learn at different rates

students learn in different ways
students must attack individual reading deficiencies

First Problem With Individualization: Recognizing That Students Are Different

We can discover student differences through cognitive and affective means. Just from reading tests alone, we can make a start in recognizing these differences. Total reading scores, for example, will show how students differ from one another. When we examine a total reading score, made up of a composite of a number of skills, we see how an individual student differs within himself. We know that, more times than not, a student's progress is not uniform in vocabulary, comprehension, and speed. If we go further, we find that an individual student will not have uniform growth in (1) vocabulary within the content fields, and (2) literal reading versus critical reading.

By way of testing at Genesee Community College, we use the Cooperative English Test, Reading Comprehension, for general screening. We also use the EDL Word Clues test for vocabulary measurement. For additional testing, when necessary, we employ the California Reading Test, Advanced, and, upon occasion, the Gates Oral Reading Paragraphs. We have found that only a few of our students need help with the basic word attack skills as our problem is largely that of vocabulary, comprehension, and speed. Although other cognitive measures such as achievement and mental maturity tests are available, we have found that a most satisfactory individualized reading program can be developed on the basis of reading test measures alone.

Some community colleges are reporting the need to go beyond cognitive measures and explore makeup within the affective domain or the non-intellectual factors. For example, there is a need to assess student motivation. It is estimated that approximately one-half of any improvement in reading stems from individual motivation or the desire to improve. There also is a need to explore student self-concepts and value positions. The St. Petersburg Junior College study reported in the February 1970 Junior College Journal is an excellent one. Clark and Ammons (1) found that one cannot predict from cognitive factors alone what students will do in

reading. However, I believe the big problem in community college teaching today is to get teachers active in the use of standardized measurement in reading, with the goal that individualized student programs will follow. Later the important affective domain can be included. In addition to reading tests and other possible measures, each student should complete an intake sheet that will provide information about the reading interests, attitudes, and habits that the student brings to the program. We also want the student to inform us as to what he hopes to get from his reading experience.

After the testing and other intake are completed, the problem is now one of setting up an instructional program based on individual needs.

Second Problem With Individualization: Developing a Program for Each Student

In working out a program for each student, I believe that theory should be held to a minimum. What is needed, above all, is functional experience. At our college, we individualize first with vocabulary. To meet students on different levels, we use the EDL Word Clues series, the Davis books, Brown's Programmed Vocabulary, and Vocabulary Growth by Coronet. Progress will be slow in vocabulary, and this will reflect in post-testing. At times, the best evidence of vocabulary growth will come from the students themselves. They continually report to us that vocabulary work leads to improved comprehension. Students will profit most from the vocabulary exercises if the program involves both context clues and word elements.

Relative to comprehension, in Flint we use an array of comprehension materials. Our main line is the Controlled Reading Study Guides and accompanying filmstrips. In all, about fifteen kinds of material are used, and these materials have continually rated the most helpful by students. Students can be of much assistance in evaluating materials. For example, if a book is too easy or too difficult, students will respond for a more difficult or less difficult book, depending on the situation.

In comprehension training, it is hard to set up a program emphasizing training in a particular comprehension skill without influencing the other comprehension skills

as well. This, however, is not to be taken as something undesirable, but rather as a kind of training situation that is valuable. Raygor (3) in his latest research points out that the differences between comprehension skills test scores are usually not reliable, in that the skill scores in comprehension are rather highly correlated. Similarly, DuBois (2) demonstrated in his study the high relationship between comprehension skills in general reading and subject matter material. Training in general reading comprehension skills affected textbook comprehension skills and vice versa. What I am pointing out here is that we should not be too analytical in attempting to teach specific comprehension skills in preference to other comprehension skills felt to be less needed. In developing comprehension skills, it is most important that the materials be at a level which the student can read with success. It is also very important that the content be of high interest to the student.

Relative to rate of reading, we must be careful when individualizing so that we are talking about rate of understanding. This emphasis has significance in academic learning. To many people, rate of reading does not connote rate of understanding. In promoting a faster rate of understanding, we can expect more rapid progress if vocabulary and comprehension, on a scale, outstrip rate. It has been our experience with the Cooperative Reading Test that if vocabulary and comprehension, on a scale, are equal to rate, emphasizing speed may lead to a loss of comprehension. In working with rate, our most promising experimental area is that of reading flexibility. We have been most pleased with the few materials available today which train students to become versatile readers. We subject only above average readers to this experience.

Another problem with individualizing instruction is that of evaluation. How successful has the program been?

Third Problem With Individualization: Evaluating the Progress of Each Student

The success of any program can be ascertained from statistical evidence and subjective appraisal. Both approaches have their value and limitation. Post-testing

will reveal to what extent the students have grown in the skills of reading. The Cooperative Reading Test, for example, uses the percentile band concept which entails one standard error of measurement above an earned score and one below it. When comparative bands do not overlap, the odds are great that a real difference in performance exists. In other words, the student, in all probability, has made genuine reading growth.

Also, student evaluations, properly conducted, can be of much assistance in determining the success of a reading program. A free-style essay of self comment by the student, for example, can report reliably on changes of attitude and interest and habits of approach. Find, if you can, to what extent student opinion correlates with objective measurement. At our college, we have found a positive relationship. Student evaluations are most insightful and profitable if they reflect success with students in the areas of motivation, concentration, study skills, help with other courses, and the enjoyment of reading.

The success of a reading program can also be determined by impact on grade point average. This impact, however, is difficult to ascertain. Four year colleges have continually reported research frustration in this area with respect to the many variables. But influence on grade point average should not be the ultimate factor in determining the success of a program. It must be recognized that in a community college many students will never matriculate beyond the freshman year. If we have improved their ability to read, a significant contribution was made even though the GPA was not affected.

In personalizing reading instruction at Genesee Community College, we have found it most helpful to take students into partnership. From this experience, we have learned directly from our consumers the ways in which we have both assisted and failed them. This has been the most valuable part of the evaluation process.

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